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ABSTRACT

Looking back at the debates about public schooling in the 1820s can be especially important today when Congress seeks to reinscribe the same definitions of schooling that the working class leaders tried to resist in the 19th century. On the platform for the New York Working Man's Party in 1829 was "equal education," a term that meant different things to different members of the party. While one faction believed that a shift in the distribution of power would come about through universal literacy, another believed that a radical restructuring of what constitutes schooling would be necessary to effect any change. The Working Man's party included several thinkers who critically examined education available to the rich and found it generally "useless"; worse, they found that it taught values that reinforced class distinctions. Unfortunately, the party's radical educational objectives--one of which called for a boarding school in which all class distinctions would be wiped away--were ultimately rejected; the party folded shortly after the electoral victory of 1829 partly because other political parties appropriated elements of its majority platform. Meanwhile, the aristocratic Whig party continued to further its objectives, which called for public education to further the nation's capacity to "build, transport, manufacture, mine, nagivate, [and] fortify." The early school system generally taught traditional values of submissiveness and acceptance of one's lot in life, respect for elders, commitment to work and activity, and rote memorization. In short, the curriculum did nothing to further critical literacy. (Contains 30 references.) (TB)

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ED 386 693

Critical Literacy Subverted: Early Public Schools, Individualism, and the Ideal of Reading

Sarah Prineas and Nancy F. Johnson, my fellow panelists, have described the ways the definition of literacy was controlled in 19th C Britain. I'd like to cross the ocean and examine some parallel developments in the young United States. I want to return to early debates about public schooling because I hope that by recovering this struggle and examining it, we can as Giroux says, "affirm the insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (97). And I think it's especially important to look at these sites today, at a time when our Congress seeks to reinscribe the same definitions of schooling which the 1820s working class leaders tried to resist. I hope that by examining the ideological foundations which undermined this working class resistance, we can remain vigilant as we encounter the current Congressional rhetoric about the purposes of education.

This research is focused on a very local site. I rely on newspapers published by and for the Working Men's Parties in New York between 1829-1833, though at some points I will compare this group to similar political parties in Philadelphia and Boston. First, I'd like to give some general background about the Working Men's Parties and their internal disagreement about how public education would challenge class hierarchies. Then, I'll point to the ways that dominant Whig voices intervened in the calls for public education. My main argument is that Enlightenment beliefs in individuality, progress, and rationality convinced public education advocates on both sides of the political spectrum that schools did not need to teach critical literacy or to redefine the structure of education.

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In the early 1800s, as a result of both urbanization and westward expansion, states abandoned the prerequisite that voters had to own property, and male, non-slave laborers gained the right to vote. In addition, the myth that class hierarchy was inevitable began to collapse. Andrew Jackson's election in 1828 was proof that the upper class was *not* by default the most fit for public decision making. With their newly granted vote, workers organized in order to further challenge the class system. Working Men's Parties sprung up in urban centers up and down the East coast, and one of their demands was for universal literacy.

The New York Working Man's Party was a strong force for several years; they founded up to fifty newspapers to speak their cause across the new nation (Pessen 43). Their candidates had striking political success in the elections in 1829, where they put up ten working men as candidates in the New York State Assembly (Pessen 44). The New York Working Man's Party platform, as printed in their newspaper, *The Working Man's Advocate* read: "All children are entitled to an equal education; all adults, to equal property; and all mankind, to equal privileges." Within the Party, however, different factions understood these criteria differently: Thomas Skidmore interpreted "equal property" as a true agrarian would: he felt the duty of the government was to divide land and money among all its citizens; Skidmore split from the Party on this issue. The rest of the party was quick to explain that the term "property" meant "equal means to pursue happiness" ("Our Motto") and that the "equal means to pursue happiness" would come about through "equal education."

What separated the remainder of the New York Working Man's Party was an interpretation about how to define "equal education." On one side, Noah Cook advocated for common, public schools in which all children would be taught to read. For him and his followers--the group which ultimately made up the majority of the Party--true democracy and a shift in the imbalance of power would be effected by universal literacy. The other faction of the Party, led by Robert Dale Owen, George Henry Evans, and Fanny Wright, believed that an educational system that did not promote the values of the dominant elite would need a drastically different structure. Unlike the Cook majority faction, these leaders seemed aware that education is not a neutral endeavor. Rather, in a move similar to our contemporary Paulo Freire, Owen's minority faction saw their society as divided between oppressors and oppressed, and they felt that the humanity of both groups was denied when the domination continued.

Freire reminds us that many upper class people who promote the rights of the oppressed feel they *must* do it because the working class is not capable (26-7). Their apparent help masks a deeper contempt. The awareness of false generosity hits the heart of the 1829 discussions of Charity schools. Consider, for example, the benevolent New York City Free School Society which received public and independent funding to cater to a rapidly expanding urban, working class population. (The population grew 153 per cent between 1820 and 1840.) (Carlton 29; Cremin "American" 98-99). The head of the Society, DeWitt Clinton, was then mayor of the city and later Governor of New York (Cubberley 124-5). In his an announcement of the Society's formation, he sounds a lot like the Rev. Norris in

Nancy's paper. He attributes the students' "destitution" to parents' "indigence. . . intemperance and vice; or to a blind indifference to the best interests of their offspring," and worries that, with parents as such bad examples, the children will become "the burden and pests of society." The Society is formed in order to "stem the torrent of irreligion and vice" and to "provide some remedy for [this] increasing and alarming evil" ("To the Public"). His disdain for his patrons is quite evident. Most labor leaders saw through this "false generosity." For example, Stephen Simpson of the Working Man's Party of Philadelphia points out that "the scanty pittance of education termed *charitable* has never realized the equal benefits of instruction to which the working people have been entitled as the producers of the wealth of society"(Simpson 1055 original emphasis).

While most of the Working Men's Parties announced their disdain for the charity schools, few proposed radically new structures. The assumption was that once children of all classes were placed together in free, public schools, the strife between the classes would begin to disappear. But the more radical faction of the NY Working Men's Party understood that merely gaining what once had been the privilege of the wealthy was not a solution. Several articles and letters in the *Working Man's Advocate* show how carefully the rich schools were being scrutinized. First, they noted the attitudes promoted the rich schools undermined the values of the working class. The editors of the *Mechanics Free Press* of Philadelphia claim that colleges and academies promote an attitude of *uselessness* (a charged term, since this adjective was most often used by the upper class to describe the poor), and that students return believing that "honest industry is only intended

for the ignorant, and that the knowledge which they are sent to acquire, is for the purpose of making something of them that shall ever after place them *above* servile labor of any kind" (original emphasis). These labor leaders understand that education itself does not promote a revolution in class structure but can, instead, mean that the workers' children will be seduced into the roles of the oppressors and, like them, disdain the lower classes.

In addition, the leaders claim that the rich schools' curricula is "useless." An essay originally from the *New York Daily Sentinel* states, "We may chance to consider branches of study which now occupy much time, unfit for public schools. But if we do, it will be not because they are too good for the people, but too useless for them: not because they are fit only for the rich, but because they are fit for nobody." The editors describe girls learning velvet painting and scorn the uselessness of that. Instead, laborers demanded civil education, asking for instruction in the laws of the country and instruction in "speaking one's mind about them" (Jackson 165). The Boston Working Men's Party, in fact, lists in its platform that no laws should be written in a way that a common person can not understand them.

The most radical structure proposed for the national education system is the boarding school which Robert Owen proposes. Unlike day students, students in boarding schools would be clothed, housed, and taught together and would not return home daily to be reminded of their class differences. All would have the same amount of time for their studies; the poor would not be called to work jobs in addition to their schooling. In fact, all students would learn trades as well as

literature and science. This school, Owens maintains, would "amalgamate [the] classes; to make of men . . . integral republicans, at once the creators and employers of riches, at once master and servants, governors and governed" ("Call").

The goals of the radical faction of the New York Working Men's Party were dramatic, revolutionary, and, ultimately, rejected. The Party disintegrated soon after its 1829 electoral victory partly because other political parties appropriated elements of Noah Cook's majority platform (Pessen 53-55). The Whig aristocracy pushed for public education on the *apparently* identical grounds that an expanded reading-literacy would improve the democratic nation: both the majority faction of the Working Class Party and educational reformers like the Whig Horace Mann argued for reading programs saying that better informed the people meant a "better" "democratically" governed country. It seems, however, that if the labor leaders let the Whigs speak for them during the development of the common school system, they must not have analyzed the ways that the aristocracy defined a "better democracy."

Consider the relationships among the political parties. Whereas the Working Men's Parties were encouraged by Andrew Jackson's election, their policies were, in general, more radical than his Democratic Party. The Democrats advocated a laissez-faire approach, arguing to give people more individual freedom, but the Working Men's Party wanted government to protect the workers from the upper classes. The Whigs, meanwhile, wanted the government to ensure the productivity and economic benefits of the country; that is, they wanted the government to support the businesses more directly (Church 63). Furthermore, as historian Robert Church

and others point out, the usual forms of social control had been undermined by the expanding cities, immigration, and the general geographic movement of families. For example, in the earlier small villages people voted out loud at town meetings, monitored by the upper class could punish a voter who disregarded accepted standards (Church 72). Likewise, small town networks of creditors and landowners ensured that the elite maintained control. As more people migrated to the cities, the aristocracy felt their power slipping. They needed a public institution to reach all classes and instill "proper" values. In short, as Ira Katznelson says, "schooling was one of the available mechanisms to incorporate citizens into the [current] regime and, in this way, to secure [aristocratic] authority and property" (Katznelson 50).

At the same time, the Whigs were a economic party who advocated public education to ensure that workers would be well trained for the jobs required of them. It was Whiggery rhetoric that won the support of the legislatures, and while that rhetoric is often coated in a voice of benevolence and patriotism, at its heart we see that the push for education has a basic economic motive. In his educational reports, Horace Mann proclaims that education "can raise more abundant harvests, [and] . . . can build, transport, manufacture, mine, navigate, fortify" (Mann 82-83). He claims that "An educated people is always a more industrious and productive people" (Mann 179).

Clearly, Whig values were passed along through the school systems; the Working Men's Party's hopes that students would learn the critical skills to change the social structure were thwarted. But the success was not because Mann had a

better sense of how literacy worked. The idealistic belief of the aristocracy that learning to read would help to maintain their social control relied on the same idealistic belief as that of the majority New York Working Men's Party: for the former, the ability to read itself would lead people to reason for the status quo, and for the latter it would lead people to reason that the status quo should be overturned. Rather, the reason the Whig ideology took effect was because the *texts* and *accepted methods of teaching* reading supported an un-critical learning.

The early school system reenforced values of punctuality and respect for elders, and encouraged workers "to accept their lot, if not happily at least submissively" (Church 68). Social and moral reforms were passed on through the choices of teachers and the formal disciplinary structure. But perhaps most troubling, given the high hopes that the Working Man's Parties placed in the literacy movement, is the fact that the ideology of the reading lessons kept poorer students in their place.

The lessons of most widely used textbook the *McGuffey Reader* taught students to be submissive. Over 100 million copies were sold since McGuffey's death in 1836 (Church 85). The*Third Reader,* for example, sought to reinforce morals of perseverance, the sin of idleness and the advantage of working hard (See Rippa 151-157). Students read, for example, about George, who is despised for being "idle" and wanders about penniless. The lesson reinforces the Enlightenment sentiment that status is a reward of hard work, and that absence of status was the result of lack of virtue. These values contrasted with the views of the Working

Men's Parties. Compare this lesson to the position of an essay from the *New York Daily Sentinel*:

> All poverty is not caused by misconduct. A man is often poor not because he is less industrious, but because he is more scrupulous than his neighbors; because perhaps he will not tell a falsehood, or stoop to a dirty trick to get rich. ("Public Education")

Of course, this anti-aristocratic message is never promoted in the school texts.

The literacy teaching methods also created submissive students. Classes performed rote memorization; students were asked questions which reinforced a single, dominant reading. For example, after the story about George, students are asked, "What must we do to escape the disgrace that fell upon George?" (McGuffey in Rippa 155). The books give only one "right" answer (avoid idleness) and these contenct questions are placed side-by-side of non-debateable questions such as "how many commas are in this paragraph?" (McGuffey in Rippa 155). As Freire points out, this method of teaching makes school "a house in which the students are invited to assume a passive attitude in order to receive the transference of the existing knowledge without reflection on the very possibility of the creation of knowledge" (Davis 66). The method prepares working class students to accept their roles as factory workers because, as Friere and Giroux remind us, without the crucial ability to read critically, literacy is reduced to "the alienating rationality of the assembly line, a mastery without benefit of comprehension or political insight" (qtd in Harper 171)

It's important to emphasize, however, that despite the fact that the Whig ideals of education were implemented with overwhelming success in the first public schools, Horace Mann and the Whigs had no better idea about how to harness the power of literacy than the Working Man's Party did. Both Whigs and the majority faction of the Working Men's Party believed that learning to read inevitably meant learning to reason. But each assumed that reason was on their particular side. For the Whigs, the notion that better education would lead to better workers "seemed so obvious, so much a part of conventional wisdom that no one took the trouble to explain just how what children learned in the common schools was going to make them more efficient or more inventive workers" (Church 66). Likewise, for the majority faction of the Working Men's Party, no one questioned whether there was a difference between learning to read and learning to "decode the ideological dimensions of [a] text, institution, social or cultural practice" (Giroux, qtd in Harper 171). Furthermore, what neither side examined was the hidden curriculum in the texts and in the teaching which undermined critical reason and created passive laborers.

There is an irony in the majority factions' failure to recognize that reading and teaching had to be understood in a political context. The workers had already written and read clear and deliberate examples of the critical "attitude toward language" necesary to decode ideologies. In the*Working Man's Advocate*, and other party newspapers, the radical leaders redefined the traditional aristocratic definitions of "usefulness" and "industry" and instead painted the elite as the lazy and immoral class. They broke through the hegemonic assumptions in order to

reinvent themselves as virtuous and capable. They sought to educate each other about the false constructions of the elite classes. And they do this because they realize that "the purpose of knowledge is action. We need to know in order to do" (Matthews, 92).

In the schools, on the other hand, the purpose of knowledge was not action but accumulation. Language was not examined in context, but was passed around like a commodity. Students advanced in grades by devouring one sequential *Reader* after another; the goal was to "acquire" them all. Nothing in the texts or teaching suggested that one should critique or question the ways the books reinforced class hierarchies. On the contrary, the hidden curricula of the early public schools created a passive acquiesence to the written word.

In the struggle for public education, the radical faction of the New York Working Men's Parties practiced critical literacy: they questioned the ideologies passed down and demanded that working class people be attributed their rightful, valued place as the backbone of the society. But the campaign to claim public schools as a site that would overturn the classism fell short when the majority of the Working Men's Party, like the dominant educational reformers, put their faith in literal literacy. Ignoring the radical factions' critiques of the schools' hidden curricula, Working Men's Party's leaders overlooked the ways that literacy training itself could implicitly support class stratification.

Recently, certain Congressional Representatives have defined the Republican purpose of education to be, first and foremost, to provide a capable workforce. Like the Whigs in the 19th C, they define education in terms of economy, not democracy.

Following Freire and Giroux, many critical pedagogists, educational throists, and literacy experts insist that the purpose of teaching should be to develop in our students the critical and rhetorical skilles essential for well-informed critizens to responsibly challenge sites of oppression. If we are to learn from our ancestors in the first struggle for public education, we must not lose sight of the hidden curricula that can undermine apparent calls for critical thinking. Neither can we lose sight of the purpose of literacy training: the purpose of reading is not to merely acquire knowledge, but to use it.

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